

## HIS LAST PRANK.

A Celebrated Character Immortalized by Mark Twain

## AS HUCKLEBERRY FINN'S DUKE

Reminiscences of James T. Burke, the Tramp Printer, who Died in Washington City, Some Days Ago. The Greatest Practical Joker of His Time—His Last Joke of Note.

Washington dispatch to the New York Press: James T. Burke, better known as "the Duke," whom Mark Twain made famous as the tramp printer in "Huckleberry Finn," died here a week ago. He was one of the most original practical jokers the country ever knew, and as a printer traveled over the entire globe. He left no relatives, but years ago married an ebony princess in Africa, where, he asserted, he was the first compositor to aid in printing the Bible, and was also the friend adviser of an African king. Incessantly at war with necessity, his daily existence was a work of genius, a problem which he always succeeded in solving by the aid of audacious mathematics. He knew how to practice abstinence with all the virtue of an anchorite, but if a slice of fortune fell into his hands he would then mount himself on the most ruinous fancies, loving the youngest and prettiest, drinking the oldest and best, and never finding enough windows out of which to throw his money. Then, when his last cent was gone, he would begin to dine again at that table spread by chance, at which his place always was laid, and preceded by a pack of tricks, go poaching on all the callings that have any connection with his art in search of that wild beast called twenty-five cents.

Burke was to be met one day leaning against the mantel shelf of a fashionable drawing room and the next standing in the arbor of some suburban dancing place. He could not take a hundred steps in Pennsylvania avenue without meeting a friend, and walk a square, no matter where, without meeting a creditor.

His last joke of note, a few months prior to his death, was at the expense of William Norton, an employee of the government printing office. Burke searched the lost and found columns of the local newspapers and noted the names and addresses of every one advertising for lost property. Then he wrote to them something like this:

"Sir (or Madam)—You wish to recover your dog (your watch, your parrot, etc.). William Norton, who resides at No. \_\_\_\_\_ street, has your property. Insist on having it back, for you will have to deal with a man who, without being positively dishonest, will begin by saying that he does not know what you mean. Yours for honesty,

"JOHN COCHRAN."

John Cochran is Norton's working assistant. The result of this joke was that Norton was arrested twice and was thrashed several times, while Cochran suffered at the hands of Norton, who would not believe that the signature was a forgery. Detectives followed Norton for weeks, and his wife was in a state of extreme nervousness for several days.

A few years ago a representative, who was called "the hyperphysical philosopher" by his cronies, ate a hearty meal, which included several small bottles, in one of Washington's upstart Bohemian resorts, then fell asleep at the table. Burke was seated near him, and, observing the sleeping politician, set to work to pull off his boot, and did so, without awakening him, then proceeded to an inner room and began to empty a water bottle into it. At that moment the congressman began to grunt as though his nap was coming to an end. The joker, losing his head, put the boot hastily down on the window sill so that it overbalanced and fell crashing through a skylight onto a billiard table on the ground floor. When the players recovered from the surprise of a shower of glass and a hydraulic boot interrupting their game, the staircase soon echoed with the hurried steps of the victims calling for vengeance. The congressman suddenly awakened, and with one bootless foot was bewildered in the presence of the irritated throng. The landlord held the boot and shook it with a threatening air as Samson must have brandished the jawbone of the ass.

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"Did I do that?" asked the congressman, still amazed and unbothered.

"Yes," replied Burke, who satisfied the landlord by telling him that somnambulism never failed to punish "hyperphysical philosophers" for their hyperphysical philosophy. Then, addressing the congressman, he even persuaded him to believe that he had been talking to the boot, calling it "old fellow," and making it partake of refreshments after excusing himself for making it so heated on the asphalt pavement.

Burke's propensity for odd pranks first asserted itself shortly after the war, when he was a medical student at the University of Virginia, in Charlottesville. A group of students saw a countryman dead drunk in the bottom of his wagon, while the horse was slowly drawing its master homeward. The night was dark, and just the time for a joke, which was suggested, and Burke was solicited for an idea. He immediately took charge, and one of the boys drove the horse up a lonely road in the suburbs, where Burke and his companions had preceded. The value of the horse was estimated, a collection was taken, and the sum placed in the farmer's pocket.

After removing the animal from the shafts, Burke cut his throat, and, when dead, braced it on its back and cut it open. The farmer, seeing meanwhile, was then lifted out of the wagon and placed in a sitting posture inside the horse and sewed in, with none of his body exposed but his head. It was daylight before the drunkard realized his position, but was too weak to "break out," so cried for help. An old negro, hearing the noise, hastened to the spot, but the unusual sight of a human head growing out of a horse frightened him so that he frantically rushed away, and alarmed the community by stating that he had seen a half-man and half-horse. The farmer was rescued from his equine prison in a rather wretched condition, and Burke was expelled from college.

In 1887 he was manager of a barnstorming theatrical company, presenting "Uncle Tom's Cabin," but Hopkinsville, Ky., was too far south for his attraction to draw crowded houses, so an artistic success resulted in a financial failure. A negro camp meeting was being held in Hopkinsville at the time, and Burke was moneyless, but cheerful, when he heard of it. Going to a drug store with a hard luck story, he had no trouble in procuring a gross of small bottles, then proceeded to a printing office, where he told his woes to the proprietor, who charitably permitted him to print a label to paste on the bottles, which read, "Dr. Burke's Hair Lotion." In the printing office press-room was a can of gasoline and some lye, the equal parts of which poured in the bottles; then he colored the preparation with red ink. With his advance agent and the negro who played Elias, Burke, with his valise full of "lotion," went to the camp meeting grounds, where he soon gathered a crowd, and in a stentorian voice explained to the gathering the merits of his wonderful "hair straightener," guaranteeing it would remove the knots from their hair on two applications, thus causing their locks to resemble those of a white person. The negro was used as an example, she having straight hair naturally.

Burke's lecture while the advance agent sold the bottles at twenty-five cents each, which did not take long, and then the trio immediately proceeded to the railroad station, where the money was divided, but a train was not due for several hours. The advance man insisted on waiting for a passenger train, but a freight train pulled up, and Burke, while his companion remained to be tarred and feathered by the "lotion"-burned negroes.

A statue of Dr. Henry D. Cogswell, a once noted temperance reformer, who gave drinking fountains to various cities, including Washington, stands in Clay street, San Francisco, on a pedestal about twelve feet in height. It was erected by the city of San Francisco, and was dedicated to an audience. During Burke's perambulation he came across the statue, and immediately devised a plan to make the temperance advocate a laughing stock. He obtained a large beer glass he filled it with varnish, on top of which was placed some raw cotton. Then, with the aid of a ladder, on a dark, rainy night, he climbed the pedestal, and tied the glass in the grasp of the extended hand. For several days passersby were amazed at the sight of the temperance work holding what appeared to be a glowing glass of beer, preparing to lift it to his mouth. A reward was offered for the discovery of the man who did the act, and detectives soon caused Burke to leave the state.

At one time Burke was a committee clerk at the capitol at Washington, and in the course of his duties was called upon to deliver a paper. He was seeking favors from members of the committee. They would buttonhole him, talk persuasively, brush dust from his shoulders, pick him up by the collar, and wait a moment to see him reach for the supposed place of lint and attempt to remove it, but instead would draw out a yard of cotton, and then proceed to an inner room and began to empty a water bottle into it. At that moment the congressman began to grunt as though his nap was coming to an end. The joker, losing his head, put the boot hastily down on the window sill so that it overbalanced and fell crashing through a skylight onto a billiard table on the ground floor. When the players recovered from the surprise of a shower of glass and a hydraulic boot interrupting their game, the staircase soon echoed with the hurried steps of the victims calling for vengeance. The congressman suddenly awakened, and with one bootless foot was bewildered in the presence of the irritated throng. The landlord held the boot and shook it with a threatening air as Samson must have brandished the jawbone of the ass.

Burke's friends were fairly numerous and hastened to form a rampart about the congressman, asking to have the matter explained, and offering, if necessary, to pay the damage.

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